



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living

Breaking Open the Word
Mary Birmingham

Twenty Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time A



Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, de: Codex aureus Epternacensis, fol. 76f, 11th c.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening prayer

Option 1: Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2: Use the prayer provided below.

Prayer for Generosity

Eternal Word,
only begotten Son of God,
Teach me true generosity.
Teach me to serve you as you deserve.
To give without counting the cost,
To fight heedless of wounds,
To labor without seeking rest,
To sacrifice myself without thought of any reward
Save the knowledge that I have done your will.
Amen.

--- St. Ignatius of Loyola

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Jesus' catechism of these consecutive Sundays highlights serious implications for Church life. We are exhorted to ask ourselves:
- ▶ Does everyone stand equally before God in our assemblies?
- ▶ Do divisions between first and last divide our communities?
- ▶ We have been reflecting on the truth that God gathers us into one flock—one people of faith.
- ▶ We are called to be faithful disciples; the place to begin is by extending God's love to one another.
- ▶ The parables of the kingdom challenge our attitudes and behaviors; they invite conversion. The liturgy is a constant call to conversion.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First reading: Isaiah 55, 6-9

- ▶ Isaiah invites us deeply into the mystery of God's heart. He invites deep conversion of soul and spirit.
- ▶ Isaiah invites metanoia—a complete turning away from sin and turning toward God.
- ▶ Believers are to embrace the ways of God and repent from sinful ways.
- ▶ Only God can deliver the Israelites from exile.
 - Exile was believed to be the result of the failure of Israel to live their covenant relationship with God. Old Testament history is resplendent with the theme of sin and reconciliation. The people sinned, God called them to repentance, and God forgave them. The pattern is repeated over and over again.
- ▶ God encourages the Israelites with his love and at the same time invites them to return to him, listen to his voice and follow his will.
- ▶ Following God's will was accomplished by listening to God's word and seeking God's will for their lives.
- ▶ Following God's will was synonymous with repentance.
- ▶ Every time Israel returns to God they experience incredible mercy, forgiveness and unconditional love of God.
- ▶ The truth that God's ways are not our ways is evident in Isaiah's theology.
- ▶ He insists that the ways of the people of Israel are based in unfaithfulness to God in contrast to God who is always faithful.
- ▶ When people return to God they experience a renewed intimacy with God and restoration of the covenant.



Mystagogy

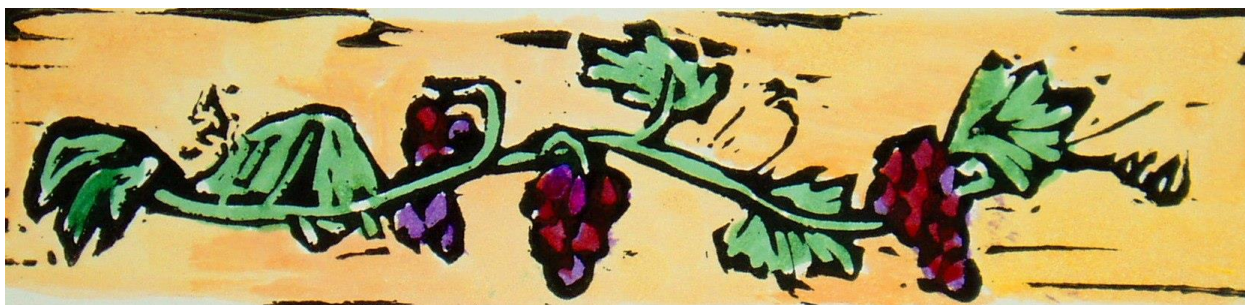
reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What evidence is there in your life that God loves you and forgives you unconditionally?
- ▶ Israelites believed that calamity was God’s punishment for sin. Do we still believe that as Christians? What do you believe?
- ▶ What does it mean to you to be intimate with God? How do you know that you share such an intimacy?

Second Reading: Philippians 1:20-24, 27.

- ▶ Paul exhorts Christians not to fold in the face of antagonistic opposition from non-believers.
- ▶ As with most Pauline letters, his letter to the Philippians begins with a formal greeting, blessing and thanksgiving.
- ▶ Paul tells the community that his death is immanent yet he is at peace. He has no reason to fear.
- ▶ Paul’s professes his hope in the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- ▶ He approaches his death in peace and utter joy.
- ▶ Paul believes that death is the portal to eternal life with Christ, the greatest gift of all.
- ▶ He also believes, however, that life affords disciples the precious opportunity to go out and bring the Good News of Christ to the world.
- ▶ Paul has not decided which option he prefers.
- ▶ He thus commits to continue the work Christ called him to do until such time his eternal fortune comes to fulfillment.
- ▶ Paul exhorts believers to embrace the same mind set.





Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is this letter a relevant letter today?
- ▶ What would have to change in your life for you to embrace Paul’s attitude?
- ▶ Have you ever given serious consideration to your own death? Are you as prepared as Paul?
- ▶ Paul’s posture of hope is contagious as is a posture of doom and gloom. To which posture are you more inclined?
- ▶ What does Christianity have to say about doom and gloom?

Gospel: Matthew 20: 1-16

Today’s gospel is quite involved and thus is broken up in sections with intermittent breaks to respond to what has been presented. Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ Matthew is the only evangelist to relate the parable of the owner of the estate who went out early.
- ▶ The owner was looking for laborers to work in his vineyard. (Vineyards were understood to metaphorically represent the people of Israel and/or the reign of God in Biblical literature.)
- ▶ Listeners would have brought that connection quickly to mind.
- ▶ The owner of the estate paid the going rate for such work. One denarius amounted to one’s days wage at near poverty level for the man and his family.
- ▶ Contrasted with the group hired first in the morning is another group of workers waiting/hoping to be hired.
- ▶ The first group bargained for their wage and was hired.
- ▶ The second group is told they would be given a wage that is fair and right, but they are not told what that wage would be. (The word *right* has religious significance. It inferred a righteous person, or that which is holy, just and epitomizes charity.)

- ▶ Herein lies one hook of the parable. Listeners wonder what wage the late -comers will receive. Very often landowners cheated workers out of a full day's pay. Would that be the case here?
- ▶ The story scrolls forward to late in the afternoon. Listeners feel the tension. What will happen next?
- ▶ The estate owner was in urgent need of help. The late hires are posed and ready to help. There is no bargaining in this scenario. There is only short time left in the workday. (The phrase "eleventh hour" as in *things came together at the eleventh hour*, has its genesis in this parable.)
- ▶ Evening has fallen and the listeners finally get their questions resolved.
- ▶ The late hires will receive the same pay as those who worked all day!
- ▶ Listeners would have marveled at the patron's incredible generosity.
- ▶ One cannot miss the irony. Everyone marvels at the patron's generosity, but one can hardly marvel at the paltry wage that was paid in the first place.
- ▶ If generosity describes the patron's response to the last hired, what would describe his response to the first hired?
- ▶ Generosity assumes that those who were hired first should have received more than those who put in less time.
- ▶ Thus, generosity is not the theme of this parable.
- ▶ Listeners would have expected a little accommodation to those who were hired first in light of how events unfolded. The first workers echoed that same reaction.
- ▶ Listeners are sympathetic to the plight of the first worker (a very human response). What is *right and just* is of paramount importance.
- ▶ The patron responds to one of the workers and calls him *friend* even though that same worker did not give the patron the customary salutation due to him as a result of his stature (thereby keeping the honor and shame code in tact).
- ▶ The listener notices a break in the relationship between the first worker and the patron evidenced by the fact that the former did not give the latter proper respect.
- ▶ Everyone is disconcerted by the unfairness of the situation, all but the last hired.
- ▶ The workers entered into a contract with the patron for an agreed upon wage.
- ▶ People expected the wage of the last workers to be based on a sliding scale of what the first workers were paid, the customary client/patron relationship of the time insisted that they should have made a fraction of what the first hirelings made.
- ▶ Listeners become aware of a reversal in the story. Events are evolving outside of what is expected as the norm and that which is customary.
- ▶ The parable affirms that wages are not the issue; relationships are. The parable highlights the client's relationship with the patron and by metaphorical extension, the people's relationship with God and his kingdom.
- ▶ Expectations are turned upside down.
- ▶ When the patron referred to the worker as friend he was crashing through the boundaries of society and inviting a personal relationship with him.
- ▶ Wages have nothing to do with a person's worth. Everyone has a place in the reign of God. All workers are needed to tend the vineyard at all hours no matter

the time of day, even at the *eleventh hour*.

- ▶ Jesus moves the listeners to a totally new paradigm shift.
- ▶ The expected outcome would have conformed to the normative demands of justice that expects the first worker's pay to have been adjusted.
- ▶ Listeners are primed to consider a new world-view.
- ▶ Listeners old and new are brought to the "gotcha moment" in the parable. The first workers are unable to make the claim that they did more work than the other workers; they simply did the work they were contracted to do.
- ▶ They only way they did more work is if they compared their work with the work of the last hired.
- ▶ There would not have been a problem if they had been unaware of the last hired group in the first place.
- ▶ What then does this parable teach about the reign of God?



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions.

- ▶ What have you heard thus far?
- ▶ What did you learn about the reign of God at this point in the parable?

The catechist continues:

- ▶ Jesus insists that the reign of God does not maintain the status quo. It is fresh and new; it is revolutionary. Normal conventions no longer hold. It is filled with surprises.
- ▶ Everyone must be on alert and pay attention to what God is doing.
- ▶ The values inherent in God's kingdom bespeak a new ordering of relationships. No longer do wages determine a person's worth. Justice is redefined; no longer do the old expectations and understandings hold.
- ▶ The new kingdom is not ordered by a juridical sense of justice.
- ▶ The parable insisted that everyone received his due. Everyone in the parable received what was just and what was right.
- ▶ That which is perceived to be just for one person may not be so for another. A scrupulous adherence to the juridical application of justice is a means of control. Jesus makes the unmistakable point: people have no control over God's reign; it cannot be manipulated.
- ▶ The bottom line? Worth is not determined by wealth and wages; it is determined by God's gratuitous, unmerited acceptance.
- ▶ The call of many laborers in the vineyard is a metaphor for God's presence and grace. Everyone is called to work in the vineyard.
- ▶ The only qualification and distinction between workers is that God called them to labor in the vineyard.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions.

- ▶ What have you heard thus far?
- ▶ What did you learn about the reign of God at this point in the parable?

The catechist continues:

- ▶ This parable also justifies Jesus' embrace of outcasts and sinners. He called everyone to work in the vineyard, saint and sinner alike. No one is excluded. No one is more privileged than another. Status does not exist in God's reign.
- ▶ Jewish people were born and bred on strict observance of the Law. It is no wonder they felt a little righteous indignation over the unfolding scenario in this parable.
- ▶ They believed they were righteous and holy in comparison to the latecomers to Christianity. They put far more effort into their spiritual life and felt more than a little consternation about those who were brought into the fold at the "eleventh hour." How human of them!
- ▶ Their response is no different than it would be today were we to bring a homeless drug addict to our church, stand him up before the "respectable" members of the parish and announce that God looks upon him in the same way that he looks upon the rest of us.
- ▶ No matter how we try to manipulate God with our own status conscious ways, God insists that no one has a privileged place at the Lord's eternal banquet table.
- ▶ God pours out his love and forgiveness on everyone, but the outcast enjoys a special place in his heart.
- ▶ Disciples must discern their own motives. Do they really want a God who dispenses justice? Are they ready for the outcome of that dispensation?
- ▶ If disciples want God to judge in a juridical manner would they stand up to such scrutiny?
- ▶ The inclusion of Gentiles at the "eleventh hour" is part of God's plan of salvation. The Jews were the first hardworking laborers; the Gentiles were the latter workers, yet all were laborers in the Lord's vineyard.
- ▶ The devotion of both groups was authentic.
- ▶ Mere human beings cannot know the mind and heart of God as Isaiah reminded us. God's ways are righteous and eternal. Who are mere mortals to question God?
- ▶ The parable challenges disciples to be ever mindful that the last hired workers fulfilled their contract; they followed the will of God. The first hired however were angry and jealous of God's favor to the last hire group.
- ▶ Bottom line? Those who think they are the most deserving as a result of doing the lion's share on God's work will find themselves out in the cold.

- ▶ Today is a catechism on attitude and motive. Christians are to examine both and honestly invite conversion in both realms.
- ▶ What kind of a disciple are we, entitled grumbler or servant minister?



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix for an example.

- ▶ In what way is this a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ What is the primary message of this Gospel?
- ▶ What determines a person's worth in the reign of God and what is the only thing that matters?
- ▶ What determines your worth in your own life?
- ▶ Do you accept the basic premise of this parable that all are equal in the eyes of God—that everyone has an equal place in God's kingdom and that all are equal in the Church? What evidence have you seen that this is true? What evidence have you seen that falls short of the truth this parable sets forth about the kingdom?
- ▶ Who would not be considered equal to us in our modern assemblies?
- ▶ In what way do you already follow the example of Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel?
- ▶ In what way do you fall short?
- ▶ What is the challenge of this parable?
- ▶ How does this parable challenge you to be a better disciple?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following questions.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR
Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

Appendix

God has always dealt with my life in parabolic ways. Shocking events have often been the catalyst for God to get my attention. God has used those events to speak to my life. As a result of the unconventional ways God has dealt with me, the door was opened for me to serve God not only in ministry but also in my life's vocation. Those opportunities come from the benevolent hand of our gratuitous God. Without God's intervention I never would have known the opportunities to serve the reign of God for the past thirty years. Lest I am ever tempted to take credit for those opportunities, I am reminded all too quickly that only God could have managed to put the puzzle pieces together so neatly.

Twenty-six years ago, I ended up in liturgical ministry because my husband's job in another city fell through. We sold our house and were forced to move to a different part of town. We joined a parish that was looking for a minister of music and liturgy. The newly assigned pastor was a friend and he asked if I would consider the position. Had my husband's job not fallen through, this opportunity never would have come my way. It changed the trajectory of our lives.

Training followed the call. That is one of many absurd, unexpected, irrational, marvelous, crazy, exciting and wonderful ways God has worked in my life. My story line has always been painted with crooked lines. Whenever I am tempted to question the ministry or the experience of people who emerge from other-than the ordinary, everyday sequence of events, I have to take two steps back and seriously ask the question: "What is God doing here?" God's grace is not bound to our limited conventions.

I was privileged to know an incredibly talented and gifted woman in ministry. She never dreamed that she would be in professional ministry. God gifted her with wisdom beyond her experience and compassion beyond her own imaginings. Very often we respond to such people with suspicion and jealousy. If they have not paid their dues, come up through the ranks, taken the hard knocks, put in their years of elbow grease, then somehow they simply cannot measure up to our standards of excellence. Those feelings simply mask feelings of inferiority and bespeak a threatened, wounded psyche.

Today's gospel invites us as Church and as members of the human family to be open to new possibilities, to expect God to act in often-improbable ways, and to be flexible enough to celebrate and empower the burgeoning gifts and ministry of all the "new kids on the block".

Human nature often entices us to be suspicious and threatened by such gifts. How many people in our churches today are held down and squelched due to someone's jealousy and animosity? When that happens the church becomes incredibly impoverished. There is room for everyone and for all their gifts. We simply cannot afford to exclude anyone.

The warning at the end of today's parable stands as a clear and present danger for all disciples who would dare grumble when recipients of God's eleventh hour grace are given the same gold watch reserved for "old timers". If we are all given the watch, what difference does it make when it is given? Who am I to question the giver? (rf. Mary Birmingham, Word and Worship Workbook, Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A. Paulist Press.)



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Catholic Social Teaching
Kingdom of God
Faith
Eschatology: Heaven, Hell and Purgatory

Ecumenism
Scripture and Revelation I or II
Liturgical Year
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well. Choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

“There are incredible implications for Church life inherent in today’s parable. Is our Church ordered in such a way that we truly believe that the first and the last stand equally at the Lord’s banquet table? We sometimes pay lip service to that truth, but our actions reveal a different truth. We cannot self-righteously lay blame at the feet of our hierarchical structure, either. It is a very human tendency to regard later converts to anything as immature, uninformed and less enlightened. Starting at the presumed top, there is no doubt a temptation for cardinals to regard new bishops as lower on the food chain, thus less important. Bishops could be tempted to regard the ministry of clergy as insignificant in comparison to the important work of bishops. Clergy might view the laity as Johnny-come-lately’s with an ax to grind and their place to find. Laity in upper level church could be enticed to regard those in parish work as inferior and their work trivial. Those in parish work might be seduced into judging their parishioners as ignorant and uninformed. Active parishioners might be tantalized to dismiss inactive parishioners as inconsequential. Groups within the parish might be charmed into thinking that new groups are a threat to their established stature and tenure. Churchgoers might be beguiled into thinking that somehow God loves them more and knows them best. “Like a merry-go-round on a frenzied, unstoppable track, the very human temptation to think we know how God will act, how God should respond and who God should choose, persist ad nauseam on the human continuum.” (Mary Birmingham, Word and Worship Workbook, Year A, 515, 516). Catholic social teaching reminds us that we all stand equal before God—that we all possess the same human dignity. Those who think they should be first will come in last and the lowly will be exalted. It is thus opportune to focus our attention on CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING.

KINGDOM OF GOD

The parable in the Gospel reminds listeners that the coming of God's kingdom is not what people expect—it is filled with amazement and surprise. People will have to be attentive and alert so as not to miss what God is doing. Justice will not be the ordered norm—God's grace will be the primary motivation for all that takes place in God's kingdom. Wages paid are usually associated with issues of justice and status. Justice is not the value in God's kingdom that it is in society. Everyone received what was right in the parable. In the kingdom of God one is valued, treasured and receives status simply as a result of God's election. It is a new way of living and being in God's world. This is a most fitting liturgy in which to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the KINGDOM OF GOD.

FAITH

The parable in the Gospel reminds listeners that the coming of God's kingdom is not what people expect—it is filled with amazement and surprise. People will have to be attentive and alert so as not to miss what God is doing. Justice will not be the ordered norm—God's grace will be the primary motivation for all that takes place in God's kingdom. In the kingdom of God one is valued, treasured and receives status simply as a result of God's election. It is a new way of living and being in God's world. The upheaval of status and expected norms is a huge challenge for believers and takes conversion of heart, mind and soul—it takes faith that can move mountains. If we are to embrace Jesus' teaching in today's liturgy it is important we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about FAITH.

ESCHATOLOGY-END TIMES, HEAVEN, HELL, PURGATORY.

Disciples are called to ask themselves what they really want from God. Do they really want justice? If they want a God who will make things "right" and judge the world like a just judge, then they had better be ready for what that means. If we were all judged simply by the standards of justice rather than grace few of us would pass the test. Thus, today's liturgy is also an invitation to consider what the Church teaches about how we will be judged at the end of life. We will therefore focus our attention on what the Church teaches about ESCHATOLOGY-END TIMES, HEAVEN, HELL, PURGATORY.

ECUMENISM

Some biblical scholars consider the late-comers in the parable as a way to remind Matthew's community to remember that the inclusion of gentiles in the Christian community is not only a moral imperative, it is part and parcel of God's plan of salvation for the world. The inclusion of the gentiles is a sober reminder today that God is a God of inclusion and intends for us to reach out to people of other faith traditions knowing that Jesus himself prayed that "all may be one in him." It is thus a most fitting opportunity to explore what our church teaches about what our response should be in relation to other faith traditions. We will focus our doctrinal session on ECUMENISM.

SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II

Jesus is the revelation of God. Jesus teaches us the mind and heart of God and his plan for establishing his kingdom on earth as we await the kingdom yet to come. Jesus reveals God's plan to us. He reveals God to all believers. That revelation continues in God's revealed, holy word. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention today on **SCRIPTURE AND REVELATION I or II**.

LITURGICAL YEAR

Any Sunday of the year is an appropriate time to reflect on the cycle of the Church year. Every Sunday is a most appropriate time to address what we celebrate in the unfolding liturgical cycle. The entire mystery of Christ from his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit is manifested in one complete liturgical year. It is thus most appropriate that we address what the Church teaches about the **LITURGICAL YEAR**.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.